A Place To Grow

Alberta's Rural Development Strategy

February 2005

105-04250/

Executive Summary

A new Rural Development Strategy for Alberta

A Place to Grow is the Alberta government's new rural development strategy. The title was chosen deliberately. It reflects the traditional ties of rural Alberta to the land – to agriculture, ranching and farming. But it also looks beyond those traditional ties to a future where rural Alberta is a place to grow new opportunities, new ideas, and new potential for the future.

While the focus is on rural Alberta, *A Place to Grow* benefits all Alberta. It emphasizes the links between rural and urban Alberta. And it is designed to make sure all parts of our province – rural and urban – are able to benefit fully from Alberta's continuing prosperity in the years to come.

A Place to Grow builds on work done to date, especially the extensive consultations undertaken by the MLA Steering Committee for Rural Development. It begins with the following strong commitment:

> *The Government of Alberta officially recognizes the importance of rural Alberta and its contributions to the Alberta Advantage and is committed to work together with rural communities and rural Albertans to foster a vibrant and sustainable rural Alberta.*

As part of that commitment, the provincial government will strive to:

- Ensure that people in rural Alberta have access to quality public services
- Adapt and adjust programs and measures to take into account the unique aspects of rural communities
- Encourage innovation in rural Alberta and promote innovative and creative solutions to the current challenges in rural Alberta
- Foster learning in rural Alberta by making sure new opportunities are available for rural Albertans to learn, adapt and develop new knowledge and skills essential for economic development
- Promote and expand rural Alberta's vital role in Alberta's competitive advantage in the global marketplace
- Make rural Alberta a key part of the appeal that makes our province the best place to live, work and visit.

The strategy outlines objectives and actions to be taken to strengthen the four pillars essential for sustainable rural communities:

- **Economic growth** – providing opportunities for rural communities to develop strong economies and benefit fully from the Alberta Advantage
- **Community capacity, quality of life and infrastructure** – ensuring that rural communities have the capacity, the quality of life, and the infrastructure necessary to remain vibrant and attractive places to live, work and visit
- **Health care** – making sure people in rural Alberta have access to quality health services, recognizing the role rural health regions can play in health renewal, and providing opportunities to develop the economic potential of health care services
- **Learning and skill development** – providing excellent schools, access to the best possible education, and expanding opportunities in local communities for people to get the skills they need to compete and succeed in the marketplace.

Combined with those four pillars, actions will also be taken to expand opportunities and ensure a strong voice for rural youth, meet the needs of seniors living in rural communities, increase the participation of Aboriginal Albertans in setting the course for rural communities, and preserve Alberta's environment.

Perhaps most important, *A Place to Grow* focuses on action – on specific actions that can and will be taken to secure a stronger future for rural Alberta. While the issues and challenges are complex and cannot be resolved overnight, action will begin immediately on a combination of initiatives. Over time, this strategy will be refined and expanded to ensure that it keeps current with changing circumstances in rural communities across the province.

Priority actions

The following actions will be taken on a priority basis to begin implementation of this comprehensive new strategy for rural Alberta.

- **Creating a strong voice for rural Alberta**

  Steps will be taken immediately to establish a new Rural Alberta Citizens' Voice, involving a representative group of people from rural Alberta in providing their advice to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. A new Rural Development Unit will provide leadership and coordination within government, cutting across various ministries and organizations to reduce barriers and bring services directly to people in rural Alberta. Through a new Rural Alberta Gateway, people in rural Alberta will have one-stop, ready access to information about a wide range of government and non-government programs and services.

The Gateway will also provide an opportunity for rural Albertans to express their views, offer advice, and provide input to government policy on an ongoing basis. A new Rural Dialogue process of regular meetings between Government Caucus and rural citizens will ensure that all MLAs have an opportunity to hear, first-hand, the rural perspective on a number of issues affecting our province.

- **Promoting economic development in rural communities**

  High speed Internet, new developments in telecommunications, and Alberta's SuperNet hold enormous potential for rural communities and rural businesses. Targeted support will be provided to municipalities and community-owned cooperatives to ensure that all businesses and homes in rural Alberta are linked to the SuperNet. Plans will also be developed to ensure that, once the connections are in place, businesses in rural Alberta are able to make active use of the full potential of high speed Internet and leading edge telecommunications to build their skills and new business opportunities. New transition teams will be established and available to communities needing targeted guidance in economic development initiatives. These teams of people from various government ministries will provide on-site advice, information and guidance to communities. Steps will also be taken to expand tourism opportunities in rural Alberta, support regional alliances, establish business incubators, and improve access to capital for businesses.

- **Building community capacity**

  The provincial government will work with communities to provide leadership training and rural development tools designed to build capacity in rural Alberta. Support will be provided to rural networks and grassroots community organizations to support community development. Consideration will be given to strategically locating public services to rural communities in order to make greater use of existing facilities. And a new community-based reinvestment and business mentorship program will be established. The importance of the arts, culture, heritage, sports and recreation to rural Alberta will be recognized and supported.

- **Improving access to health care**

  Access to health care is a concern to both rural and urban Albertans. Steps will be taken to make better use of the capacity in rural hospitals and health regions to improve access for people in rural and urban communities and to build the economic potential of health services in rural communities. Responsibility for ground ambulance services will be transferred to regional health authorities.

As outlined in the new provincial Mental Health Plan, regional health authorities are expected to develop specific plans for improving access to mental health services by the spring of 2005. Further steps will be taken to develop and implement access standards and guidelines for essential health services so people in rural Alberta understand how long they can reasonably expect to wait for certain services, especially emergency services.

- **Expanding learning and skill development opportunities**

A new Minister's Advisory Committee on Small and Rural School Programming will be established. Implementation of LearnAlberta.ca will be a top priority, including expanded use of technology to improve access, teaching and learning in rural communities. Incentives will be provided to encourage rural school jurisdictions and educational institutions to work with community agencies to make their schools and facilities a hub of services for children, communities and lifelong learning. New bursaries will be established to support rural students who attend post-secondary institutions and urban students who may want to attend rural-based post-secondary institutions. Steps will be taken to expand training opportunities for beginning professionals in rural communities and encourage them to move to and begin their careers in rural Alberta. Current levels of assistance available for students in rural communities will also be reviewed to ensure that it is sufficient to cover their expenses in attending post-secondary education. Further steps will also be taken to expand access to trades, apprenticeship and other post-secondary institutions in rural Alberta. A new rural development institute will be established at a rural post-secondary institution to act as a repository for research and information, to provide training and human resource development, and to providing consulting services.

- **Sustaining and enhancing the quality of rural Alberta's environment**

First priority will be placed on implementing Alberta's new Water for Life Strategy and working with rural communities to maintain a safe and secure supply of water. That includes increased support for upgrading water and wastewater treatment and establishing a long-term capital development fund to support regional water and wastewater management systems. Specific actions will be taken to improve waste management practice and manage the impact of waste and odour producing operations. Work will begin on establishing a land use database for the province. And assistance will be provided to small and medium sized rural businesses who incur costs as a result of changes in environmental regulations, particularly related to climate change.

- **Providing opportunities for rural youth**

  The Alberta Rural Youth Council provides a forum for young people to be actively involved in developing policies and programs at the provincial level. With their support, a youth conference will be held and a study on the quality of life for rural youth will be launched. Steps will also be taken to develop community youth engagement strategies, identify and develop youth leaders, develop a youth entrepreneurial program, and support economic and skills development so rural youth can remain in rural communities.

- **Engaging and supporting seniors**

  Expanding the range of assisted living options for seniors in rural communities will be a top priority. Steps will also be taken to expand home care, remove barriers to transportation for seniors, and ensure that a range of services and supports is available. These issues apply not only to seniors but also to people with disabilities and other groups in rural communities and it's important to ensure that these services are well coordinated in rural communities.

- **Encouraging participation of Aboriginal people**

  Working with Aboriginal leaders and community members, the provincial government will continue implementation of current policies and programs covered under *Strengthened Relationships: The Government of Alberta's Aboriginal Policy Framework*. A First Nations Training to Employment Partnership Program and a First Nations Economic Participation Strategy will be developed and implemented. Aboriginal youth will have new opportunities to become involved in 4H programs specifically designed and adapted for Aboriginal people.

Next Steps

Work on the priority actions identified in this new Rural Development Strategy will begin immediately. In future years, the provincial government will rely on the advice provided through the new Rural Citizens' Voice to adapt and modify the strategy to meet changing needs.

A Place to Grow is not designed to be the solution to every challenge in rural Alberta but to act as a catalyst for action in communities across the province – actions that will sustain a rural way of life that was vital to our past and is just as vital to the future of our province.

Introduction

A commitment to rural Alberta

2005 is a special year in Alberta's history. It's the year we celebrate Alberta's one hundredth birthday.

A lot has happened in our province's first 100 years. Alberta has become an economic powerhouse, thanks in large part to abundant natural resources and the strong entrepreneurial spirit of Albertans. Albertans have been quick to seize opportunities and shape them to their advantage and the advantage of our province as a whole. As a result, Alberta businesses are at the leading edge in new technologies and innovations, health and medical research is producing new treatments and cures for some of the world's most serious illnesses, Alberta's students lead the world in educational achievements, and our quality of life is among the best in the world.

A lot has changed in rural Alberta as well. Unfortunately, not all of the changes have been positive. Fifty years ago, about half of all Albertans lived in rural communities. Today, the percentage has dropped to below 20%. Alberta's cities are growing rapidly while many rural communities are facing declining populations and uncertain futures. Much of the province's economic growth has occurred in the cities and along the Highway 2 corridor between Edmonton and Calgary. Rural communities have struggled to preserve their own local businesses, attract highly skilled professionals, and create opportunities for young people to stay in smaller communities without having to leave to build their futures.

As we approach the end of Alberta's first century, the situation for the province's agricultural industry is a serious concern. Several years of drought combined with BSE and uncertainty around US and international markets have taken a serious toll on farmers and ranchers across the province. Total farm income has dropped in the past year, fewer people are employed directly in agriculture and agriculture-related industries, and the outlook is uncertain at best. While agriculture is certainly not the only industry in rural Alberta, there is little doubt that it has a ripple effect in virtually every rural community in the province.

In the face of those challenges, the purpose of this Rural Development Strategy is to reinforce our province's commitment to rural Alberta and to make sure rural Alberta is a place to grow, a place to seek new opportunities, and a place to build futures. The Strategy is not designed to be the solution to every challenge in rural Alberta but to act as a catalyst for action in communities across the province – actions that will sustain a rural way of life that was vital to our past and is just as vital to the future of our province.

Building on work done to date

In 2002, Honourable Shirley McClellan, Deputy Premier and Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, established an MLA Steering Committee for Rural Development to examine the challenges and opportunities facing rural Alberta. The goal was to develop a framework for rural development that could be linked to Alberta's economic development strategy.

Doug Griffiths, MLA for Wainwright, and Luke Ouellette, MLA for Innisfail/Sylvan Lake, consulted widely with people in rural communities, with representatives of various organizations, and with government ministries. They reviewed reports and studies undertaken to date, and held focus groups in rural communities across the province.

Their report, *Rural Alberta: Land of Opportunity*, identified four pillars essential to develop sustainable communities in rural Alberta: health, learning and skill development, economic growth and community infrastructure. Those four essential pillars need to be linked to other elements of sustainability including quality of life, arts and culture, support for youth and seniors, opportunities for Aboriginal Albertans, and preservation of the environment. The report also called for a strong voice for rural Alberta and continuing input into decision-making at the provincial government level.

In March, the provincial government also released its new vision and 20 year plan for the province's future. *Today's Advantage, Tomorrow's Promise* outlines a vision of "a vibrant and prosperous province where Albertans enjoy a superior quality of life and are confident about the future for themselves and their children."

The vision outlines a future for our province where small towns, farms and ranches are a vital part of Alberta. One of the four key opportunities in the plan is to make Alberta the best place to live, work and visit, and that includes an important role for rural communities.

> Vibrant rural communities are also essential to the province's economy and overall quality of life. The Alberta government will implement a rural development strategy that assures dynamic rural communities where rural and urban families, individuals, organizations, businesses and governments are contributors to the growth, prosperity and quality of life of Albertans. The SuperNet provides an electronic highway to all communities, making it more viable for businesses and individuals to compete globally from rural areas. Health services and educational opportunities will be enhanced by new technologies, and sparcity and distance funding will be reviewed to ensure basic services are retained or developed appropriately. The economic opportunities of the Calgary-Edmonton corridor can be distributed more widely with appropriate infrastructure. (*Today's Advantage, Tomorrow's Promise*)

This Rural Development Strategy for Alberta builds on the work done to date, especially the work of the MLA Steering Committee for Rural Development. It reinforces the province's commitment to rural Alberta and focuses the provincial government's collective efforts on ensuring that rural Albertans are able to contribute to and share fully in Alberta's future prosperity and outstanding quality of life.

Most important, the Rural Development Strategy focuses on action – not just on vague ideas – but on specific actions that can and will be taken to secure a stronger future for rural Alberta. While the issues and challenges are complex and cannot be resolved overnight, action will begin immediately on a combination of initiatives. A strong rural voice, combined with a clear commitment to rural Alberta, will ensure that the vision and goals of this Strategy become a reality for rural Albertans.

Identifying the challenges

Rural Alberta: Land of Opportunity identified a number of important challenges for rural Alberta.

Human resources

Rural communities are losing their youth and their skilled professionals, both sources of potential leadership.

Social infrastructure

Many areas are losing important services, like schools, health care, and recreational and cultural programs which support economic and community development.

Physical infrastructure

Rural communities regard public buildings as community assets and want them used effectively. They are concerned about the affordability of essential services like water treatment and community facilities. Many feel roads and other transportation services in their communities are not adequate.

Business and economy

International, national and local crises have had a disproportionate impact on rural communities. Opportunities exist for the diversification of the rural economy, but access to the necessary skills and tools, like technology and financing, is limited.

Working together

Regional collaboration can help meet many of the challenges facing rural communities. Partnerships are seen as critical to successful rural development among communities, government ministries and industry.

Culture and quality of life

Preservation of their heritage and quality of life is essential to enhance the attractiveness of rural communities as good places to live and invest.

Environment

Good stewardship of the environment is seen as critical to maintaining industries like agriculture and tourism, and as a source of economic diversification. However, rural Albertans are concerned that they bear the costs of good stewardship while all Albertans enjoy the benefits.

Government

Rural Albertans believe that government funding formulas, policies and regulations do not recognize their unique circumstances and that it is increasingly difficult to get rural concerns on the provincial agenda.

All of these challenges must be addressed through a clear vision, concentrated action, and effective partnerships among governments, businesses, organizations, and community members.

A vision and commitment for rural Alberta

Starting with a clear vision

As outlined by the MLA Steering Committee on Rural Development, the provincial government's vision for rural Alberta is as follows:

> *Rural Alberta has vibrant and sustainable communities where rural and urban families, individuals, organizations, businesses, and governments are vital contributors to the growth, prosperity and quality of life of Albertans.*

The following important principles provide the foundation for this Rural Development Strategy:

- The Government of Alberta's role is to create a positive environment for rural development and to work with rural communities to support locally developed initiatives, plans and projects.
- All Albertans should have access to a minimum level of essential services.
- Good stewardship of Alberta's land, air and water is critical, with a focus on sustainability and preserving both the economic and quality of life advantages Alberta's environment provides.
- Action must be initiated and led at the local level, building on local resources and comparative advantages.
- Action must allow flexibility and innovation, recognizing the unique needs of different communities and regions.
- Action must be collaborative, not competitive, with cooperation among rural regions and communities, across and among levels of government, and between urban and rural communities.

A strong commitment to rural Alberta

Recognizing both the challenges currently facing rural Alberta and the vision of strong and vibrant rural communities, it is important for the Alberta Government to reinforce its commitment to rural Alberta.

The Government of Alberta officially recognizes the importance of rural Alberta and its contributions to the Alberta Advantage and is committed to work together with rural communities and rural Albertans to foster a vibrant and sustainable rural Alberta.

Consistent with that commitment and our 20 year plan for the future of Alberta, the provincial government will strive to:

- Ensure that people in rural Alberta have access to quality public services
- Adapt and adjust programs and measures to take into account the unique aspects of rural communities
- Encourage innovation in rural Alberta and promote innovative and creative solutions to the current challenges in rural communities
- Foster learning in rural Alberta by making sure new opportunities are available for rural Albertans to learn, adapt and develop new knowledge and skills essential for economic development
- Promote and expand rural Alberta's vital role in Alberta's competitive advantage in the global marketplace
- Make rural Alberta a key part of the appeal that makes our province the best place to live, work and visit

A framework for rural development

This Rural Development Strategy underscores the commitment to rural Alberta and provides a framework for comprehensive actions to secure a stronger future for rural Alberta. The Strategy reflects the framework outlined in *Rural Alberta: Land of Opportunity*.

Specifically, the Strategy outlines objectives and actions to be taken to strengthen the four pillars for sustainable rural communities:

- **Economic growth** – providing opportunities for rural communities to develop strong economies and benefit fully from the Alberta Advantage
- **Community capacity, quality of life and infrastructure** – ensuring that rural communities have the capacity, the quality of life, and the infrastructure necessary to remain vibrant and attractive places to live, work and visit
- **Health care** – making sure people in rural Alberta have access to quality health services, recognizing the role rural health regions can play in health renewal, and providing opportunities to develop the economic potential of health care services

- **Learning and skill development** – providing excellent schools, access to the best possible education, and expanding local opportunities for people in rural Alberta to get the skills they need to compete and succeed in the marketplace

Combined with those four pillars, actions also will be taken as part of this strategy to expand opportunities and ensure a strong voice for rural youth, meet the needs of seniors living in rural communities, increase the participation of Aboriginal Albertans in setting the course for rural communities, and preserve Alberta's environment.

All of those actions are contingent on having a strong and consistent voice for rural Alberta. That means people in rural Alberta will have better access to information, support and advice from a wide range of provincial government programs and services. It means all government policies and directions will take into account their impact on rural Alberta. And it means Alberta will take the lead in developing innovative solutions to the challenges faced in rural communities across the province.

A strong voice for rural Alberta

The voices of rural Albertans – their unique needs, issues and perspectives – need to be heard on an ongoing basis. Moreover, they should help shape government policy and set the course for the development of rural communities across the province.

To provide a strong voice for rural Alberta, the following actions will be taken.

A new Rural Alberta Citizens' Voice will be established.

A representative group of citizens from rural Alberta communities will be asked to review the challenges and issues in rural Alberta and to provide advice directly to the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development on an ongoing basis. This permanent new voice for rural citizens will ensure that rural Albertans have regular input to all government policy decisions, particularly those that have an impact on rural communities.

A new Rural Development Unit will provide leadership and coordination.

Currently, a number of different ministries within government offer programs and services that impact either directly or indirectly on rural Alberta. In some cases, these programs are not well known nor are there mechanisms in place for coordinating these services and providing a deliberate, focused catalyst for provincial actions specifically directed to rural Alberta. Furthermore, there is a need for more focused research, sharing of information, developing best practices, and targeting support to develop leadership, capacity and resources in rural communities.

Specifically, the new Rural Development Unit will:

- ✓ Work with various rural-based organizations to identify issues and challenges, review current and emerging government policies, and facilitate collaboration among various agencies and organizations in addressing rural issues
- ✓ Work with representatives of government ministries to reduce barriers to services in rural Alberta, ensure that all government policies, rules and regulations are reviewed from a rural perspective, and address issues specific to rural Alberta
- ✓ Develop a coordinated rural gateway for access to a full range of services and support from governments and non-government service providers
- ✓ Work directly with rural communities that need assistance in facilitating rural leadership, rural community planning, and small business development
- ✓ Establish transition teams using existing resources within the provincial government to work directly with communities facing economic and community development challenges

- ✓ Provide leadership and direction for research, best practices, information sharing, and the development of tools for communities to use to adapt to change and develop sustainable communities
- ✓ Work with the Alberta Rural Youth Council to support and encourage initiatives for rural youth
- ✓ Provide ongoing support to the work of the Rural Alberta Citizens' Voice.

A new Rural Alberta Gateway will provide rural Albertans with ready access to government programs and services.

Accessing the range of provincial, federal and local government programs and services can be a complex maze. A new Rural Alberta Gateway will be established, giving people in rural Alberta a single point of contact for a full range of information, advice and support available from provincial, federal and local governments and not-for-profit organizations. The rural website (www.rural.gov.ab.ca) will provide on-line access to information unique to rural communities and rural issues. In addition, steps will be taken through the Rural Development Unit to coordinate rural development support and initiatives. Rural Albertans with specific issues, concerns and questions will be able to contact the new Rural Alberta Gateway for access to a full range of information and advice, all specifically related to rural Alberta. The Gateway will also provide an opportunity for rural Albertans to express their views, offer advice, and provide input to government policy on an ongoing basis. Communities wanting assistance to build their community capacity and adapt to change will also be able to access provincial expertise and transition teams by contacting the Rural Alberta Gateway.

A new Rural Dialogue will be established between rural Albertans and Government Caucus.

As Alberta continues to urbanize it is becoming increasingly more difficult for many MLAs to be aware of and understand issues and needs from a rural perspective. Regularly scheduled meetings in rural Alberta between Government Caucus and rural citizens will provide the venue to communicate both the contributions and the challenges of rural Alberta. Having MLAs understand the unique circumstances in both rural and urban areas will prepare them to better tailor legislation, policies and programs to benefit all Albertans. The inter-dependence of rural and urban communities is critical to the success of Alberta.

On an ongoing basis, these important steps will strengthen the voice for people in rural Alberta, provide a direct source of information and support, and reinforce the work of the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, other Ministers, and rural MLAs in sustaining rural communities across the province.

Taking action to fire up rural communities

The message of "firing up" rural communities is a deliberate one. Sustaining the status quo may be acceptable for some communities in the short term. But in the longer term, rural communities need to be invigorated and recharged. They need to take a proactive approach to tackle issues and challenges, make choices, build opportunities in their communities, and determine the course of their community's future.

Clearly, this is a shared responsibility with leadership coming first and foremost from the communities themselves. Other key partners need to be actively involved including the provincial government, municipal and federal governments, local businesses and industries, community organizations, schools, health and children's authorities, and most important, community members themselves.

The following sections highlight the provincial government's objectives in working with all the various partners to strengthen and support rural communities. The actions outlined are those that will be taken on a priority basis to achieve the objectives. Over time, the mechanisms put in place to provide a strong rural voice will add to and adjust this strategy to ensure that it continues to respond to changing issues and challenges in rural Alberta.

Promoting economic growth

One of the primary ingredients that must be in place to ensure the vitality of rural communities is a strong economic base. Without a secure economy, businesses are not able to succeed and stay in rural Alberta. There are few opportunities for young people to build their futures in rural communities. And there are increasing challenges in attracting and keeping entrepreneurs, professionals and highly skilled employees.

Agriculture certainly is not the only industry in rural Alberta, but most rural communities rely on a strong agriculture base to support not only farmers and ranchers in the area but also other businesses and facilities in their communities. There is little doubt that the serious challenges in today's agricultural marketplace are having a profoundly negative affect on many rural communities.

The provincial government continues to work with producers, with other provinces, and the federal government to address these challenges and secure a more positive future for Alberta's agriculture industry. One of the key strategies is to expand the focus on value-added agriculture and to work with the industry to achieve a goal of $10 billion in primary agriculture production and $20 billion in value-added production by 2010. A recent provincial report called *Growing Alberta's Agri-Food Industry Together* details the

actions being taken by government to follow through on recommendations from the 2000 Ag Summit and expand the value-added side of Alberta's agriculture industry.

Looking ahead, Alberta's new value-added strategy, *Securing Tomorrow's Prosperity*, envisions a future where Alberta's economy is less reliant on raw materials and more focused on industries that add value and create highly skilled jobs. Clearly, the economic future for many rural communities must depend less on agriculture and the production of raw materials and more on a rich diversity of innovative, knowledge- and technology-based industries where distance makes no difference and rural-based businesses are able to compete and succeed. Key ingredients to this success include access to technology, a supply of highly-skilled and well-trained people, leading business expertise, and a positive community environment.

Effective transportation links are also vital to economic growth in rural Alberta. Not all the future development in the province needs to take place along the Highway 2 corridor. With better transportation infrastructure and improved access to and from rural communities, there are opportunities to expand and create new industries and businesses outside of the Highway 2 corridor.

Tourism offers many opportunities for expanding economic development in rural Alberta. There is a growing interest in eco-tourism and ag-tourism, where visitors have an opportunity to experience Alberta's unique landscapes and rural way of life. These opportunities need to be actively pursued and marketed not only within Alberta but also across Canada and around the world.

Objectives

- Build on the traditional economic strengths in agriculture, forestry, oil and gas, mining, and manufacturing in rural Alberta
- Expand innovative and value-added business opportunities in rural Alberta
- Build on the tourism potential of rural Alberta
- Increase the diversity of employment opportunities in rural Alberta
- Expand the availability of highly skilled and trained people to work in and lead business initiatives in rural communities

Priority Actions

- ✓ Provide targeted support to municipalities and community-owned cooperatives to ensure that all businesses and homes in rural Alberta are linked to the SuperNet
- ✓ Develop plans to ensure that, not only are the connections in place, but people and businesses in rural Alberta make active use of the full potential of high speed Internet and leading edge telecommunications to build their skills and create business opportunities

- ✓ Establish a targeted rural strategy consistent with the province's value-added strategy, *Securing Tomorrow's Prosperity*, and develop specific strategies for expanding value-added industries in rural communities
- ✓ Explore ways of leveraging the research and renewal aspects of the federal/provincial/territorial Agricultural Policy Framework and maximizing the capacity of local applied research associations
- ✓ Support rural partnerships, regional cooperation, alliances and grassroots community organizations through a combination of incentives, tools and information, training, best practices information, and direct support
- ✓ Work with communities to establish a network of business incubators to provide business and entrepreneur support services in rural Alberta
- ✓ Develop a transportation and trade strategy that supports and facilitates economic development in rural communities
- ✓ Facilitate stronger linkages between rural and urban businesses in response to market opportunities
- ✓ Expand tourism opportunities in rural communities by:
    - Providing targeted funds to establish, expand and market tourism opportunities in rural Alberta, including plans for developing, packaging and marketing eco-tourism and ag-tourism
    - Developing new tourism destinations in rural Alberta
    - Revitalizing provincial parks and campgrounds to support rural tourism and enhance the quality of life in rural Alberta
    - Improving access to and advertising/signage about rural tourism sites, attractions, and local businesses
- ✓ Provide stable, long-term funding for regional networks involved in rural development
- ✓ Ensure that communities have access to provincial expertise and support through transition teams that provide on-site advice, information, and support in rural economic development
- ✓ Review the current processes for accrediting professionals trained in other parts of the world, work with professional organizations to speed up the process, and encourage more people to consider careers in rural communities
- ✓ Review current provincial government rules, regulations and policies, including the use of publicly funded infrastructure, use of Crown lands, and location of government programs and services, to ensure that they provide the necessary flexibility and support rural development
- ✓ Work with communities, industries and others to ensure that there is a sustainable supply of water to support a broad range of development in rural Alberta
- ✓ Improve access to capital for value-added and other small businesses operating and starting up in rural Alberta
- ✓ Develop effective strategies to assist small rural businesses in securing access to energy and utility services and mitigating the impact of volatile energy and utility costs

Building community capacity, quality of life and infrastructure

Economic development and community capacity are directly linked. Studies suggest that quality of life is one of the critical factors businesses consider when deciding where to locate. Unless the necessary capacity, quality of life and infrastructure are in place in rural communities, it is unlikely they will be able to attract and retain new businesses and industries. Professionals and highly skilled people from doctors and nurses to teachers and tradespeople all are looking for a positive quality of life and a good place to build their futures and raise their families. At the same time, without a strong economic base, it is difficult to sustain community infrastructure and quality of life. The two go hand in hand.

Many rural communities across the province have much to offer through a combination of their quality of life, thriving heritage, arts and cultural opportunities, affordable and safe communities, and positive economic opportunities. Others face serious challenges in attracting businesses and keeping people in their communities. A combination of actions and strategies are needed to build local community capacity and strong community leadership and to support active community volunteers, local initiatives and opportunities.

Arts, culture and the distinct heritage of rural communities have much to offer in developing the quality of life in rural communities and in developing new opportunities for people to live and work. Many communities have taken steps to build theatre groups, open art galleries and museums, and create an environment where not only local people enjoy a better quality of life, but also there is a potential to attract artists, writers, and actors – people who often are inspired by the rural landscape and a rural lifestyle. Promoting the arts, culture and heritage opportunities helps reinforce the unique features of rural communities, attract visitors from the cities, and add vitality to rural communities.

Other essential ingredients of the quality of life in rural Alberta must be reinforced and sustained, including recreation opportunities and parks, affordable housing, safety and security, active volunteers, and a positive and welcoming community spirit.

Objectives

- Build the capacity of rural communities to respond to changing circumstances
- Ensure that rural communities remain safe and secure
- Establish collaborative networks and regional partnerships to support rural development
- Encourage and support strong leadership in rural communities
- Maintain and enhance the quality of life in rural communities by promoting arts and culture, enhancing parks and recreation, supporting volunteers, and making sure that rural communities are vibrant places to live, work and visit

Priority Actions

- ✓ Provide rural communities with the resources and support needed to build their local capacity for leadership, planning, development, assessment and empowerment
- ✓ Support the development of multiple-use facilities and alternative use of existing community infrastructure and municipal buildings through innovative designs, changing regulations, and offering grants in lieu of taxes for rural municipalities
- ✓ Maintain and maximize the use of publicly-funded infrastructure by:
    - Expanding alternative uses for existing infrastructure
    - Ensuring the sustainability of rural roads, highways, air and rail transportation
    - Identifying and removing barriers to the joint use of local transportation services for seniors and for people with disabilities
    - Providing cost-comparable services and technical support for high speed Internet access and encouraging widespread use of technology in rural communities
    - Providing adequate financial support to municipalities to allow them to build and maintain infrastructure and enhance their competitive advantages
    - Ensuring timely access to utilities, continuing support for Rural Gas Co-ops and Rural Electrification Associations, and using their expertise to develop other aspects of community infrastructure
- ✓ Support an expanded role and use of libraries to deliver community and regional-based information and unique services
- ✓ Provide operational and conditional funding to support to regional networks
- ✓ Increase support for policing in smaller communities and encourage communities to address crime prevention, restorative justice and local policing priorities
- ✓ Facilitate awareness and appreciation for the arts, recreation, sport, community and cultural activities, historical resources, parks and protected areas by:
    - Expanding the role and effectiveness of Agricultural Societies
    - Developing an inventory of local recreational, cultural and social facilities
    - Providing support for Community Foundations which, in turn, can support local community-based projects
- ✓ Establish a community based reinvestment process designed to allow community members to invest in building capacity in rural communities including innovative local and regional projects, recreation, heritage, culture and arts projects, youth training and initiatives to attract and retain professionals and businesses in rural communities
- ✓ Review funding provided to Agriculture Societies to support the continued operation of rural recreational and other facilities
- ✓ Develop strategies to help community volunteer organizations and Agriculture Societies mitigate volatile operating costs i.e., utilities, insurance and rent
- ✓ Promote rural communities as a positive place to live, work, and visit

- ✓ Work with rural communities to enhance their ability to attract and retain professionals, entrepreneurs, and people who are new to Canada and new to Alberta

Improving access to health care

Access to high quality health care services is a top priority for Albertans. But in rural Alberta, the challenge of providing timely access to necessary health services is even more of a challenge.

Considerable work is underway across the province, including in health regions that serve rural communities, to change and improve the way health services are delivered. New primary health care approaches are being implemented to provide access to teams of health care providers. Technology is being used to improve access to health services. For example, Health Link provides province-wide telephone access to health information and advice. Telehealth is being used to link people and physicians in rural communities with diagnosis and treatment from specialists in urban centres.

At the same time, rural communities face many challenges in improving access to health providers and health services. Many communities struggle to attract and keep physicians, nurses, pharmacists, technicians, and other essential health care providers. This has a double impact. Not only does it make access to services more difficult but it also means rural communities are not able to benefit from the economic potential a strong health sector can provide.

As plans for health renewal proceed, special attention needs to be paid to the unique circumstances and opportunities in rural communities. That should include making the maximum use of the new and innovative approaches to delivering care, making better use of existing hospital facilities in rural communities, developing centres of expertise in rural communities, and stepping up efforts to attract and retain a variety of health care providers. Regional health authorities, the provincial government, post-secondary institutions, the College of Physicians and Surgeons, health professional organizations, health care providers working in rural communities, and community members should all be actively involved in developing a comprehensive plan for rural health care.

The economic development potential of health care also has to be a critical feature in rural communities. Health care is not only a cost; it also is an economic driver. It provides a source of employment and an opportunity to attract highly skilled professionals to rural communities. Health centres and hospitals, clinics, drug stores, home care services, continuing care centres and a whole range of health care programs and services can be a vital factor in the economies of many rural communities.

Objectives

- Ensure that people living in rural Alberta have access to quality health care services as close as possible to where they live
- Establish and implement access standards for critically important health services particularly emergency care
- Expand the availability of health care providers in rural communities through a variety of actions including expanding training opportunities for health care providers in rural communities
- Make the best use of available capacity in health facilities in rural communities

Priority Actions

- ✓ Transfer responsibility for ground ambulance services to regional health authorities (beginning in 2004-05)
- ✓ Expand access to mental health services in communities through the development of regional mental health plans consistent with the Provincial Mental Health Plan (spring 2005)
- ✓ Use the current capacity in rural health facilities to provide expanded access to certain surgeries, treatments and unique programs
- ✓ Speed up the process for reviewing credentials of foreign trained health care providers so they are able to work in rural communities
- ✓ Establish access standards and guidelines for essential health services so people in rural Alberta understand how long they can reasonably expect to wait for certain services
- ✓ Ensure that people in rural Alberta have 24 hour a day, seven days a week access to emergency services within 30 minutes of the emergency call being placed
- ✓ Work with regional health authorities to develop centres of expertise and innovation in rural communities
- ✓ Review current funding for rural health authorities to address cost pressures in rural communities, remove barriers for people moving across regional health boundaries to access necessary services, and ensure there are adequate resources to meet rural Albertans' health needs
- ✓ Adjust current education and training programs for health care providers to ensure they have experience in rural communities and more is done to encourage them to stay in rural communities
- ✓ Continue to work with the Rural Physician Action Plan and expand on that model to attract and retain other health care providers in rural communities, including nurses, rehabilitation therapists, technicians, etc.

Expanding learning and skill development opportunities

Schools are the heart of rural communities. And just like families in all parts of Alberta, parents in rural Alberta understand that a good education is critical to the future of their children and their communities.

While the Learning Commission report provided many excellent directions for education across the province, there were few recommendations directed specifically at schools in rural Alberta. Rural schools face unique challenges in offering the full range of programs to small numbers of students, attracting qualified teachers, busing students to the nearest school, and accommodating increasing costs.

More needs to be done to address those unique needs. Rural school boards should be encouraged to work together, to share schools and resources wherever possible, and to work with community groups and agencies to establish schools as a hub of services for children. More needs to be done to attract and retain qualified teachers and to make the most use of the latest teaching and learning technologies to improve access to the curriculum and related resources.

At the post-secondary level, more needs to be done to encourage young people from rural Alberta to go to college, to technical institutes, to university, or to enter an apprenticeship – and then return to rural communities to build their future careers. In today's highly competitive marketplace, a high school diploma is simply not good enough for most young people to secure a positive and productive career.

Furthermore, given the rapidly changing marketplace, people working in and operating businesses in rural communities need access to opportunities to upgrade and enhance their skills and their knowledge on an ongoing basis. This is essential to ensure that value-added businesses and industries can develop and flourish in rural Alberta. It also provides opportunities for people who are under-employed to upgrade and expand their skills so they can take advantage of opportunities that are available in their own home communities.

Instead of relying only on technology and distance learning or requiring people in rural Alberta to move to major centres to access a post-secondary education, more should be done to expand the availability of post-secondary education in rural communities. That could include satellite campuses, travelling instructors, and other innovative alternatives. This not only is a benefit to people living in rural communities but also is a way of attracting people from major centres to take courses and experience life in rural Alberta.

Objectives

- Use information technology and distance learning to supplement the work of teachers, expand access and maintain high standards of quality education in rural Alberta
- Recognize the realities of small schools in rural Alberta and ensure that adequate funding is available
- Expand opportunities and support for youth in rural Alberta to get a post-secondary education
- Expand access to apprenticeship and trades training in rural communities
- Provide programs and services to help rural Albertans manage their careers and adapt their skills to meet the demands of a changing labour market
- Encourage young people to return to rural communities once they complete their post-secondary education

Priority Actions

- ✓ Step up implementation of LearnAlberta.ca to improve access for students and assist teachers and administrators in rural schools to incorporate and use technology as an effective tool for teaching and learning. The first priority for pilot projects and new initiatives should be rural schools and rural students.
- ✓ Establish a Minister's Advisory Committee on Small and Rural School Programming to provide ongoing advice on ways of improving education in rural schools
- ✓ Review the adequacy of funding for rural school jurisdictions on an ongoing basis to ensure that their unique needs and costs are addressed
- ✓ Provide incentives for rural school jurisdictions to work together on transportation plans to reduce busing times for students
- ✓ Provide incentives for rural school jurisdictions to work with community agencies to make their schools a hub of services for children and communities
- ✓ Review current capital plans for the construction and renovation of schools, ensure that those plans address needs in rural Alberta, build in incentives for school jurisdictions to work together and share school space where appropriate, and ensure that capital formulas take into account community use of existing schools
- ✓ Expand awareness of the importance of post-secondary education and the trades to young people, parents and community members in rural Alberta
- ✓ Ensure that young people in rural schools have access to the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) and the Youth Apprenticeship Learning Opportunities Project (YAP)
- ✓ Provide incentives for school jurisdictions to work together to attract qualified teachers and professionals
- ✓ Establish bursaries for rural students to support their post-secondary education and ensure that they return to rural communities to work. The bursaries would provide financial assistance over five years and would be established jointly by Alberta Learning, rural school jurisdictions, and rural communities.

- ✓ Review current levels of assistance available for rural students and ensure that it is sufficient to support their expenses in attending post-secondary education
- ✓ Take steps, starting with rural high school students, to improve awareness of the actual costs of post-secondary education, counter perceptions that students in rural Alberta can't afford to go to post-secondary education, and reinforce the opportunities for careers in rural communities
- ✓ Use distance learning technology, satellite programs and other innovative approaches to provide trades training (e.g. electricians, construction trades, etc.) in rural communities
- ✓ Use the Apprenticeship Access Fund to expand opportunities for trades training in rural-based colleges and other non-traditional facilities

- ✓ Create a rural development institute at a rural post-secondary institution that would:
    - Be a repository for research, information and models of best practices on community economic development
    - Be a primary training and human resource development organization in community economic development
    - Provide consulting services in community economic development

Sustaining and enhancing the quality of rural Alberta's environment

Stewardship of Alberta's environment and natural resources is a responsibility we all share. But people in rural Alberta have a unique attachment to the land and a vested interest in Alberta's environment. They understand, perhaps more than others, the value of sustaining Alberta's land and water resources for future generations of Albertans.

At the same time, agriculture practices in rural Alberta can and do have a direct impact on the quality of Alberta's land, air and water. More needs to be done to work with industries in their management practices to balance the importance of promoting economic development, expanding tourism, and preserving the environment. Consistent with Alberta's new *Water for Life* strategy, action must be taken to make the best use of Alberta's water resources and to ensure that all rural communities have access to safe drinking water.

Objectives

- Ensure that people in rural Alberta have access to a safe and secure water supply
- Ensure the efficient and effective management of Alberta's water resources through full implementation of *Water for Life*, the province's water strategy
- Use innovative practices to manage the environmental impact of farm operations
- Balance the importance of promoting economic development, developing the tourism of Alberta's unique rural landscapes, and preserving the environment

- Support rural Albertans' initiatives to counter the impact of climate change and ensure good stewardship of the environment

Priority Actions

✓ Support rural communities in maintaining a safe and secure water supply by:
  - Introducing a bottled drinking water program for small, at-risk communities
  - Increasing funding to upgrade water and sewage treatment systems and establishing a long-term capital development fund to support regional water and waste water management systems
  - Providing support to communities to expand training for water treatment staff and to increase testing of water quality

✓ Improve waste management practices and manage the impact of waste and odour producing operations by:
  - Implementing a variety of communications strategies and demonstrations to raise awareness, bring information about best practices and new approaches to farmers and ranchers, and provide training for producers
  - Developing and evaluating best practices and implementing pilot projects in cooperation with industry
  - Supporting the livestock industry in developing a "Livestock Air Quality Strategy"
  - Supporting the development, adaptation and use of technologies to improve waste management or reduce odours from waste and odour producing operations
  - Updating the Odour Control Initiative strategic plan to reflect current research and identify gaps for further research and technology transfer needs
  - Exploring bio-energy as an option for handling waste products from crop and livestock production.

✓ Provide assistance to small and medium sized rural businesses who incur economic costs as a result of changes in environmental regulations

✓ Develop and implement a land use database as the foundation for a province-wide land use plan

✓ Raise awareness, undertake targeted research and support rural initiatives to manage and reduce greenhouse gases

Providing opportunities for rural youth

Youth are the future of our province. Rural communities face serious challenges when they lose their young people to cities and to other communities. The reality is that young people in rural Alberta often leave home to get a post-secondary education or pursue career opportunities. While all young people should have an opportunity to pursue their

futures anywhere in the world, the key is to encourage as many of them as possible to come back – to return to rural communities and build their futures there.

The future of rural communities depends on finding effective ways do just that – to encourage young people to stay if possible and, if not, to come back. Young people provide the energy, the ideas, and the skills to build future opportunities in rural communities. When they have their own families, they support local schools. They volunteer in community organizations, run local businesses, are active in cultural, arts and heritage events, and contribute directly to the quality of life in rural communities. More needs to be done to give young people an active voice in their communities and in planning community initiatives, and to ensure that they see the potential to build their futures in rural Alberta.

Objectives

- Provide youth in rural Alberta with a strong and effective voice
- Encourage young people to stay and build their futures in rural Alberta

Priority Actions

- ✓ Work with the Alberta Rural Youth Council to support a rural youth conference and conduct a study on quality of life for rural youth
- ✓ Develop a rural youth entrepreneurship program in partnership with rural organizations to provide business and leadership skill development and mentorship for rural youth
- ✓ Continue to support economic development, learning, and skills development opportunities to allow rural youth to build their future careers in rural communities
- ✓ Develop community youth engagement plans for communities to use in identifying potential leaders and involving youth in community activities, plans and initiatives

Engaging and supporting seniors

Alberta's population is aging. And that's true of rural communities as well. In many cases, seniors are the backbone of rural communities. Seniors often are active volunteers in a wide range of community activities and projects. They have contributed much of their lives to raising their families, building business and community opportunities, and preserving the rural way of life. They continue to contribute through their steady incomes and active support for their communities. And they provide an ongoing link between the past and the future through their children and their grandchildren.

Unfortunately, as people age, the care and support they need is not always available in their home communities. That can mean they have to move to other communities where nursing homes or lodges are available. It also can mean relying heavily on family

members and friends when basic services like transportation to get groceries, go to doctors' appointments, or attend community events is not available. As outlined in *Healthy Aging: New Directions for Care* (Broda report), more and more seniors want to remain active, independent and in their own homes as long as possible. Rather than moving into continuing care centres, with expanded home care, a range of housing options and supportive living arrangements, and readily available transportation and community services, older people can stay in their own communities and "age in place."

Objectives

- Expand the range of supportive living and housing options in rural communities
- Ensure that adequate home care services are available
- Improve access to transportation, community services, and other supports necessary to allow seniors to remain in their own communities
- Provide opportunities for seniors to continue to contribute to their rural communities

Priority actions

- ✓ Work with private, not-for-profit and community organizations to expand access to a range of assisted living options so that seniors in rural communities can stay in their own or nearby communities and get increasing levels of care as they age
- ✓ Increase support for home care available through rural health regions
- ✓ Identify and remove barriers to improved transportation for seniors living in rural communities
- ✓ Work with communities to ensure that a range of services and supports is available for seniors to remain in rural Alberta
- ✓ Work with communities to encourage seniors to play an active role in providing mentorships to young people, maintaining their volunteer activities, and continuing to be active participants in their communities

Encouraging participation of Aboriginal people

Aboriginal Albertans share many of the same goals as other people living in rural Alberta. Many Aboriginal Albertans live in rural communities or count on neighbouring towns as their major centres for business and trade. They are interested in preserving their cultural and community heritage and preserving the environment. They are interested in building strong economies and opportunities for their young people. And because of the growing population of Aboriginal Albertans, their voice and their aspirations for rural communities will be even more important in the years to come.

Objectives

- Ensure that Aboriginal Albertans participate fully in rural development opportunities across the province

Priority Actions

- ✓ Facilitate strengthened relationships among Aboriginal, federal, provincial and local governments, industry and other interested parties to enhance the participation of Aboriginal people in the continuing development of rural economies and communities
- ✓ Fully implement the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Policy Framework developed jointly by Aboriginal people and the provincial government
- ✓ Continue to work with Aboriginal leaders, organizations and community members to support actions under *Strengthened Relationships: The Government of Alberta's Aboriginal Policy Framework*
- ✓ Expand opportunities for Aboriginal youth to become involved in 4H programs, designed and adapted specifically for Aboriginal youth
- ✓ Implement the First Nations Training to Employment Partnership program
- ✓ Develop and implement a First Nations Economic Participation Strategy

Next Steps

Work on the priority actions identified in this new Rural Development Strategy will begin immediately. In future years, the provincial government will rely on the advice provided through the new Rural Citizens' Voice to adapt and modify the strategy to meet changing needs.

A Place to Grow is not designed to be the solution to every challenge in rural Alberta but to act as a catalyst for action in communities across the province – actions that will sustain a rural way of life that was vital to our past and is just as vital to the future of our province.